COMMENTARY

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SOLZHENITSYN'S QUEST FOR FAITH

Religion is not taught but caught from someone who has it. We learn about the spiritual world from those who have been there.

Dean Inge, quoted in Understanding and Believing. Essays by Joachim Wach

The most famous conversions have been dramatic: Abraham hearing God's voice commanding him to leave his home and journey to a far-off land; Saul on the road to Damascus, blinded by a light brighter than the sun and hurled to the ground. Modern scholarship finds abrupt conversions not uncommon; a recent appraisal of over 200 works on this subject notes that the typical conversion is preceded by conflict, guilt and other such difficulties, which were "resolved by an intense, sudden transformation . . ."1 Similarly, N. Arseniev wrote that Solzhenitsyn experienced "what Dostoevskii (like Pascal and the Apostles Paul and John) considered to be the central Christian experience: the being seized and laid hands upon by the boundless, compassionate self-surrendering love of the One who has shared and continues to share our suffering."2


It has recently been shown, however, that Dostoevskii's conversion was not a matter of his "being seized and laid hands upon" by God's love, but a much more complex and extended process. Similarly, Solzhenitsyn's conversion also lacked any such dramatic "being seized and laid hands upon." Unfortunately, these two writers, despite their creations of galleries of living characters and their abundant keen observations, have never described their own conversions, but only mention this reality. This article will attempt to trace Solzhenitsyn's gradual abandonment of Marxism and then of skepticism, and his turn via Stoicism and deism to Christianity. It will not explore his Russian Orthodox beliefs or their role in his politics and oeuvre, subjects which need more extended treatment. This article, then, is but a beginning.

Solzhenitsyn's first faith, in Russian Orthodoxy, came to him easily in early childhood and was just as easily abandoned. His second faith, in Marxism-Leninism, he acquired without effort before his teens. But his return to his first faith (of course at a higher level) required a prolonged struggle, however much that childhood faith had once appealed to him. He told Michael Scammell, his superb biographer, of "the reassuring icon that hung in one corner of his room ... tilted down so that its holy face seemed to be gazing directly at him. At night the candle in front of it would flicker and shudder. And at the magic moment between waking and sleeping, the radiant visage seemed to detach itself and float out over his bed, like a true guardian angel." Other than this brief glimpse of serenity and security, Solzhenitsyn has given only one other clue to his early religious feelings. In an untitled prayer addressed to God, which he wrote at age 34 in 1952, he recalled his "boyhood in the bright singing of Thy temples." Other childhood memories of religion are of persecution of his faith. When he was three his mother held him up at arms' length to watch soldiers "filing arrogantly down the central nave" in Kislovodsk's Church of St. Pantaleimon to rob the